



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on December 12, 2012

Michigan Kicks “Hornets’ Nest” With Right-to-Work Laws

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder signed two right-to-work bills into law late Tuesday afternoon, as thousands in Lansing staged angry demonstrations and a union official in Washington likened the bills to “kicking a hornets’ nest.”

“I don’t view this as anti-union at all,” Snyder, a Republican, said of the bills, one affecting public employees and the other covering those in the private sector. Both bills forbid the requirement, standard in union contracts, that non-union workers pay union dues as a condition of employment. “I believe this is pro-worker,” said Snyder, who argued that the legislation will attract more business into the state and thus create more jobs. Michigan, where unemployment is at 9.1 percent, has one of the highest jobless rates in the country. Opponents argued that those who have jobs will end up working for less without the leverage of unified workforces supporting their respective unions.



Thousands of union members and supporters descended on the State House Tuesday, some as early as 5 a.m., in anticipation of the vote by the House of Representative on the two bills, passed last week by the state Senate. Beating drums and chanting, crowds created what the *Washington Post* [described](#) as a “deafening thunder” as the lawmakers voted. Later, demonstrators moved across the street to the Romney building where the governor has an office. Riot police surrounded the building to keep the protesters out. Police pepper-sprayed some of the demonstrators and removed them from the front of the building. State police reported three arrests at the site.

The Romney building has an ironic significance for the pro-union demonstrators, since it was named after the late Governor George Romney, a Republican and the father of this year’s GOP presidential candidate, Mitt Romney. The elder Romney, who was governor of Michigan from 1963 to 1969, signed the first state laws giving collective bargaining rights to public service employees.

The United Auto Workers, the largest union in Michigan, viewed Tuesday’s actions by the legislature and governor as a blow to its organizing and collective bargaining efforts in a state where the union was founded and thrived for decades.

“Symbolically, it’s a huge setback,” UAW President Bob King [told](#) the *Wall Street Journal*. “Maybe it will awaken a sleeping giant.” King said union attorneys are looking into potential legal avenues for repealing the legislation, a goal shared by Michigan Democratic Party Chairman Mark Brewer, who said “all legal options are on the table.”



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Michigan law allows voters to “accept or reject” statutes, giving opponents 90 days from the date the legislature adjourns to gather enough signatures to get the question on the ballot for the 2014 election. The number of signatures must equal eight percent of the more than three million voters who cast ballots in the last gubernatorial race. But Republicans in the GOP-dominated legislature attached a spending bill to the legislation, making it harder to repeal.

Both Gov. Snyder, who is expected to run for reelection in 2014, and Republicans who supported the bills will be targeted in the next election by union organizers, who will fight like a nest full of angry hornets, [promised](#) Mike Podhorzer, political director for the AFL-CIO in Washington, D.C.

“When right-wing groups have gone after the labor movement, it’s like kicking a hornets’ nest and workers just don’t back down,” Podhorzer said.

Prior to the November election, Snyder said he wanted to avoid the kind of “divisive” fight that was certain to accompany an effort to pass right-to-work legislation. But the governor said he changed his mind after unions made an unsuccessful effort to put collective bargaining rights into the state constitution. Snyder said he was also encouraged by the experience of Indiana, which recently passed a state right to work law that, he said, has helped the Hoosier State attract new businesses. Supporters believe the new law will give Michigan an advantage over other Midwestern states, like Ohio, that do not have right-to-work legislation, a view shared by Richard Vedder, an economics professor at Ohio University.

“This is a great victory for American workers,” Vedder [told](#) the *Lansing State Journal*. The O.U. professor predicted it would be “only a matter of time before the other big Midwestern states follow suit or have their lunches eaten by Indiana and Michigan.”

“We’re going to see some major investments in Michigan over the next two to three years,” [said](#) Neil De Koker, the head of Troy, Michigan-based trade group, Original Equipment Suppliers Association, which represents auto component makers. But any change in the business climate resulting from the new legislation may take longer than De Koker suggests. The bills signed Tuesday do not affect existing contracts, and the UAW’s bargaining agreements with the big three automakers do not expire until 2015.

The adoption of right-to-work laws is a new development in the Midwest. Most right-to-work states are in the nation’s southern tier, where unionized workers are fewer in number and organized labor has less political clout. It is also a measure of the decline of older manufacturing companies and workers, both in the “rust belt” and nationwide. Michigan, with 17.5 percent of its workforce in labor unions, remains the nation’s most heavily unionized state. But the UAW, which once had as many as one million members in the United States, has seen that number fall to 654,000 active members by 2004 and about 380,000 today, after years of cutbacks by the nations’ auto makers.

In what is widely regarded as a tactical political move, lawmakers exempted unions representing police and firefighters from the new right-to-work legislation. Gov. Snyder said last week the exemptions were to avoid the threat to public safety that possible police or firefighter strikes would pose. But including the public safety employees might also have eroded support for the measure at the State House and with the general public, which tends to be sympathetic to the protective services.

A similar exemption was included in a 2011 law passed in Wisconsin that limited the collective bargaining powers of unions representing public employees. Gov. Scott Walker, a Republican who strongly backed the legislation, survived a recall effort this year that was heavily funded by organized



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labor. In Ohio, a law backed by Republican Gov. John Kasich, limiting bargaining rights for 250,000 public employees, did not include an exemption for police and firefighters unions. It was overturned by [referendum](#) last year.

With or without the exemption, the new legislation was bound to stir up impassioned opposition from organized labor and its supporters, who have long viewed right-to-work laws as an anathema.

“What they’re talking about is giving you the right to make less money,” President Obama [told](#) union members at an engine plant near Detroit Tuesday.

“For millions of Michigan workers, this is no ordinary debate,” [said](#) Carl Levin, the state’s senior U.S. senator. “It’s an assault on their right to have their elected bargaining agent negotiate their pay, benefits and working conditions, and to have all who benefit from such negotiations share in some way in the cost of obtaining them,” the Michigan Democrat said. The state’s governor, meanwhile, defended the legislation as an opportunity for economic growth in a state hard hit in recent years by a national recession and a near collapse of much of the auto industry.

“We were at the bottom for the last decade. We lost over 760,000 jobs. Since I came to office, we’ve gained 141,000 back,” Snyder [said](#). “We’ve become very competitive, and this is another step in that process to say, ‘let’s give workers a choice.’”

Photo of protesters at a rally outside the State Capitol in Lansing, Mich., Dec. 11: AP Images



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